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Gender Monstrosity

Deadgirl and the sexual politics of zombie-rape

Dr Steve Jones

Introduction

Deadgirl (2008) revolves around a group of male adolescents (JT, Rickie and Wheeler) who find a naked undead woman in an abandoned asylum and keep her as their “personal sex object.” Given that rape is a common theme within American film generally (Sarah Projansky 2001, p. 20), and the horror genre specifically (see Carol Clover 1993; Jacinda Read 2000), this plotline is unsurprising inasmuch as it belongs to an established cinematic lineage. Of course, that history does not make the film itself less offensive. Deadgirl has been justifiably characterized as “nasty ... [and] tasteless” (Peter Debruge 2008), particularly because of its sexual depictions. Deadgirl has been categorized as torture porn: a subgenre that has been commonly branded as bringing extreme, graphic, misogynistic horror into the multiplex (that is, the mainstream). Despite being offensive, Deadgirl’s sexual violence is thus nevertheless indicative of what is representationally acceptable within contemporary popular culture.

That acceptability is made clear by comparing Deadgirl to other recent films that centralize sexual violence. Movies such as A Serbian Film (2010), I Spit on Your Grave (2010), The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence) (2011) and The Bunny Game (2010) have been censored in the UK because they—unlike earlier torture porn

films—graphically depict sexual abuse. *Deadgirl*, in contrast, was not subject to censorship in this same context, despite its emphasis on rape. Although all of the films named portray bound women being sexually degraded, the central difference between these films and *Deadgirl* is the latter's use of the zombie trope. Despite Debruge's suggestion that rape is a contentious theme "regardless of whether the victim happens to be alive, dead or undead" (Debruge 2008), the lead victim's zombidom is key to the relative cultural acceptability of *Deadgirl*'s sexual violence.

While I concur with Debruge's objection, I do not agree that we should dismiss *Deadgirl*, particularly since his statement is worth considering in-depth. The zombie is a disruptive figure that has been interpreted by scholars as denaturalizing norms, calling fundamental aspects of our social relations into question. Despite being highly problematic, *Deadgirl*'s offensiveness raises a number of pertinent and politically urgent questions about selfhood, gender, identity politics and violence. Such questions include: what exactly is being provoked by the plot's necrophilic overtones? Is *Deadgirl* a corpse (an object), or do her partial sentience and gender mean that *Deadgirl* is about rape rather than necrophilia? Is the zombie—an animated entity without consciousness—rapable? How does the gendered zombie fit into an ideologically loaded history of femaleness?¹

It is in this light that *Deadgirl* will be employed as a case study, demonstrating what is at stake for feminism in attending to such horrific representations. I will use *Deadgirl* to explore the ways in which the animated corpse relates to hegemonic gender tropes (how *Deadgirl* is connoted as well as denoted as female), and the political concerns that arise from representing femaleness as sexually vulnerable living-death. As a starting point, the following sections will tackle the film-title's twin elements: first, *Deadgirl*'s deadness, and second, her femaleness.

Objectionable: Zombie as (Sex) Object

Since *Deadgirl* belongs to the zombie tradition, it is crucial to grasp how the film negotiates its heritage. Despite the zombie's surprisingly varied forms, the monster is primarily defined by its undeadness: its corpse-like yet animated nature. Zombies are typically understood as empty blanks that lack consciousness.² As Kevin Boon (2011, p. 54) has it, "the zombie is incapable of examining self. It is emptied of being." However, this archetypal view downplays how the zombie has changed since its classic incarnations in films such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). During the 1980s particularly, zombie fiction has shifted. Principally, horror no longer issues from the monster's presence—manifesting the evacuated self—but instead arises from humans becoming zombies. That is, crossing the living/dead threshold has become increasingly central to zombie-horror. Emphasis is thus placed on the fragile life–death boundary, and the difference between those apparently dichotomous states.

Zombie portrayals have also shifted accordingly. From Bub in *Day of the Dead* (1985) to the eponymous Fido (2006), zombies have become distinctly more like their living counterparts—subjects rather than corpses—to the point where zombies are frequently more akin to "average people who are experiencing mental anguish" than mindless animated flesh (Sorcha Ni Fhlainn 2011, p. 140). However, even where zombies demonstrate self-awareness, their zombidom means they are still perceived as "others" by their living counterparts. Zombie fiction's living characters stubbornly overlook the possibility of zombie autonomy despite evidence to the contrary, simply because zombies are zombies.

Deadgirl's writer, Trent Haaga, shares this view. His attempted defense of *Deadgirl* on the film's DVD commentary reveals his misogyny, but equally exposes the film's central problem: that *Deadgirl* is more than just a corpse. It is worth dwelling

on his remarks in some detail at this juncture, since Haaga's stance elucidates problems that arise from subjecting an explicitly gendered, living-dead being to sexual abuse. Haaga opens his defense by asking whether the film would offend if Deadgirl were "just a blob of space protoplasm with a bunch of fuck holes in it." This ill-conceived comparison evinces that he considers Deadgirl to be an object, not even comparing her to an animal: that is, an entity able to express its suffering in terms we can apprehend. The flaw in his logic raises the same questions skirted over by Debruge's review: is a zombie (an animated cadaver) an object or a being? As a non-conscious entity, can a zombie be thought of as suffering? Can the zombie consent? Can we utilize terms such as misogyny when dealing with the partially formed zombie-subject? To ask these questions is not to contemplate how we would feel were the Deadgirl to be replaced by a "blob," but how we would feel if she were replaced by a non-animated corpse. Despite Haaga's protests, a film in which a female cadaver was sexually molested by male teenagers would surely be perceived as being about violation.

Other problems arise from Haaga's conception of "fuck holes." It is unclear how we can tell that the holes were designed to be fucked. Haaga places the ability to define function with the fucker, rather than the fuckee to whom the orifices belong. These "fuck holes" matter, since gender is the primary identity element that marks Deadgirl as a subject rather than just an object. It matters that Deadgirl is almost entirely focused on male agency, which is manifested as sexual violence. Indeed, Deadgirl's plot makes it clear that Deadgirl's gender cannot be ignored. Not only is her sex prioritized in the title of the film, it is the label that defines her. She is only ever referred to as "Deadgirl." Moreover, the protagonists rape her because she is female. After the teens realize Deadgirl's bite can create more zombies, Dwyer (a male jock) is bitten, meaning he becomes undead. The protagonists then seek a female to abduct in order to create a new sex slave. If Haaga's comparison with a blob were accurate, Dwyer should have been chained up and abused, since he also has "fuck holes." In

neglecting the potentials of zombie-subjectivity, Haaga ignores that there is a history attached to representations of the female body: that women have been subordinated by men, perceived as animalistic, or as represented as simply “fuck holes.”

The gender bias is evident in the continuation of Haaga’s defense:

in a Saw movie you can take a real living breathing woman . . . and scalp her while she’s screaming for her life and then kill her and it’s like, all good fun . . . you have a zombie girl that these guys fuck, and it’s not like you’re taking a blowtorch to her nipples or pliers to her vagina.

At this point, another crew member cannot help but point out Haaga’s hypocrisy, retorting “you’re just shooting her and poking her holes and having sex with them.” Not only does Haaga miss the point that, unlike Deadgirl, Saw balances its victim-base’s gender mix, he also fails to observe that his plot revolves around male sexual violation of the female body exclusively, to the extent that any open orifice—even a bullet wound—will suffice, so long as it is a female body that is penetrated. His comment fails to acknowledge that rape is a hideous crime. It is not necessary to couple rape with other forms of genital violence in order to make it unacceptable. Promoting an ethos where such attitudes and deeds are tolerable, especially within mainstream popular culture, is a distinctly dangerous proposition. “The point,” according to Haaga, is apparently that “you’re not getting off on torture, you’re using her as a sex object.” Since Haaga sees nothing wrong with this statement, I am unable to defend the film against accusations of misogyny, at least in relation to authorial intent. However, I do wish to explore the implications arising from this objectification.

Zombie-Rape versus Necrophilia

Haaga discusses *Deadgirl* as if it is a necrophilic narrative. Contemplating the differences between the raped zombie and a sexually violated non-animate corpse usefully draws attention to the problems at hand, particularly those arising from the acceptability of its gender representations, both for Haaga and for censorship bodies such as the BBFC. Comparing zombie-rape to necrophilia makes it clear that the zombie, unlike the corpse, has subjectivity. The contrast also delineates the terms of *Deadgirl*'s offensiveness. *Deadgirl*'s evident sentience makes the film's representations especially offensive and horrific.

The zombie's animated-death amplifies the fascinating repulsiveness associated with corpses. The cadaver is neither strictly object nor person, inasmuch as it does not entirely lose its person-ness to object-ness in death, especially for the departed's loved ones. This goes some way towards explaining why necrophilia is associated with defilement and violation. Necrophilia seeks to bridge that gap by "convert[ing] a subject that has become an object back into a subject again" (Scott Dudley 1999, p. 289; see also Patricia Maccormack 2008, p. 118), yet this ultimately stresses the corpse's object-ness, since the necrophiliac's desire is projected onto the cadaver. The zombie, on the other hand, lays some claim to autonomy—however partial—since they express desires (chiefly, anthropophagical) of their own. Zombie-rape involves a powered relationship then, since the zombie's desires are negated, and the violator's are prioritized. This power bias is evinced by the rapist's perception that only their desire is a valid expression of subjectivity.

In this sense, the attacker does not consider the zombie violatable; that is, able to refuse consent. MacCormack (2008, p. 119) contends that necrophilia is outlawed because we "invest the cadaver with volition, thus in necrophilia the corpse is a victim of rape against its 'will'." Yet, because zombies are able to express their non-consent, they are more comparable to sub-human beings rather than objects

per se. While Joanna Bourke avers that some “people are deemed to be unable to consent to sexual intercourse in the first place . . . Slaves, for instance, were simply not human enough for the concept of ‘consent’ to be relevant”—leading her to conclude that “they were [perceived as] inherently rapable” (2007, p. 76; see also Donald Levy 1980, p. 195)³—it is worth noting that this final phrase emphasizes power-bias: it is the violator that decides if the subject is rapable.

This power is converted into pleasure. It is hard to imagine the victimizer viewing such victims as objects. In the case described by Bourke, as well as in zombie-rape, the victim is cognizant of and makes the violator aware of their violation. In both cases, the violator may only seek to justify the violation by focusing on: (a) the victim’s inability to protest; (b) their perception that any protest matters far less than their own pleasure; their pleasure in specifically defiling the victim (taking pleasure from the protest); or the knowledge that no repercussions will result from their action (the victim does not ‘matter’ in a social sense, or lacks rights). Indeed, Joseph J. Berest suggests that despite the corpse’s inability to remonstrate against its defilement, necrophilia is founded on “sexual pleasure [derived] from inflicting physical or mental pain on others” (namely the living relatives of the deceased (1970, p. 210); see also Robert C. Solomon (1974, p. 344)). Even necrophilia therefore hinges on the violator’s powered infliction of suffering.

Defined in these terms, it is little wonder that *Deadgirl* is sadistic in tone. When Dwyer asks “why is she all tied up and beat up and shit?,” JT responds “because that’s the way she likes it.” In one sense, the illusion of consent is fostered by the fact that unlike a corpse *Deadgirl* responds to touch. JT notes that it is “fucked up” that she reacts when he touches her thigh. In another sense, JT recognizes that the sexual behaviors he employs are explicitly violent. He is thus aware that she suffers, and justifies his own desire and lack of empathy by deeming that her inability to “say no” signals her consent. Notably, this is a prevalent defense evoked in rape rhetoric (see Bourke 2007, p. 50; Susan Caringella 2009, pp.

126–132; Stephen J. Schulhofer 1992).

Moreover, Wheeler cannot help but ponder Deadgirl's past, asking how she got there and who she was (in the past tense). Despite JT telling him to "shut up"—so as not to personalize her—Wheeler describes her as human. JT shares this conception of their "fuck slave" in his description of Deadgirl as "unwilling but able." To allot unwillingness to an object is to de-objectify, recognizing her will as that which can be violated. This corpse is able to make her non-consent known, even if she lacks the capacity to verbalize her protest.

"Necrophilics,"—who are presumed to be male in Beatriz Dujovne's assessment—"view the corpse as a safe object that offers neither resistance nor opposition, eliminates all risks of rejection and retaliation" (Beatriz E. Dujovne 2004, p. 635). Deadgirl, in contrast, makes her resistance clear inasmuch as she tries to escape, scratching JT's face when Rickie releases her arm. Her zombidom therefore partially fulfills the necrophilic fantasy that her non-assent does not matter. Yet zombification also permits Deadgirl to express her suffering for the film-viewer, who can judge the male teens' actions as rape. The zombie motif therefore allows us to empathize directly with Deadgirl in ways that would not be possible if she were inanimate, despite her animalism and monstrosity. Regardless of the fact that Deadgirl is presented as sexually horrific from the moment they discover her and label her in these terms, her monstrosity fractures rather than fixes those associations.

Haaga suggests that Deadgirl's moral ambiguity is centered on the viewer asking whether they are "JT or Rickie" (or "probably" a bit of both). This question is a by-product of his male-oriented focus. We should also be imagining what it is to be Deadgirl. There is a distinct lack of empathy for Deadgirl in Haaga's supposition, which brushes over how complex the zombie's relationship with objectness is. Much like Bourke's slave-rapist case, power is revealed by perceptual bias. Despite Haaga and the film's characters acting as if Deadgirl is a corpse

rather than a subject, her sentience clearly matters. The root-point of Deadgirl's subjectivity is the identity facet by which her violators define her: that she is female. Discussions of zombie-autonomy tend to focus on the living/dead binary: on "existential anxiety (that one should continue to live, but be nothing)" (Nick Muntean 2011, p. 84). Yet this means the powered, socio-political implications of zombie-autonomy are frequently overlooked. Some humans face precisely that kind of existence; living, but being treated as if they are objects. Deadgirl's cumulative message is that women are one such grouping.

"Fuck Slave": Women and Zombies as Gendered "Objects"

While the zombie symbolizes "monstrous otherness" (Boon 2011, p. 50), little scholarly attention has been paid to zombie-gender in this respect. Contra to MacCormack's (2008, p. 104) assertion that "zombies are bodies, nothing more," having "no race, no gender, no sexuality," zombies have been increasingly positioned in gendered roles. These range from Bud, the horny male zombie of *C.H.U.D. 2* (1989), and *Flesh Eating Mothers'* undead matriarchs (1988), to *Braindead's* sexually active priest and nurse zombies (1992), and the titular *Zombie Strippers* (2008). The recent rise in zombie porn— including *Porn of the Dead* (2006) and *Dawna of the Dead* (2010)—further attests to the contemporary zombie's gendering. It is surprising that this trend has been overlooked by scholars, not only because popular horror's gender politics have been the subject of close academic scrutiny (see, for example, Clover 1993; Barbara Creed 1993), but also because zombidom is such an apt metaphor for female oppression. When gendered female, the undead fittingly symbolize this discursive history of femininity under patriarchy.

Deadgirl's gender points towards broad political horrors that are pertinent to representational issues both in and beyond the horror genre. Portrayals of the female body are inextricable from the socio-cultural history that has connected

the female body to an ideological value system. The body is a “socially inscribed surface” (Avril Horner & Angela Keane 2000, p. 2), and thus Elisabeth Bronfen has argued that the body has been framed as a site of political contestation, “involving the distinction between masculinity and femininity, but also . . . where to draw the line between the living and the dead” (2000, p. 112; italics mine). The gendered zombie is an apposite cipher for this history then, particularly because it refuses to die.

The gendered hierarchy of “bodiliness” itself reveals a power bias. “[M]ind/body dualism” situates “males [as] the guardians of culture and things of the mind,” while “associat[ing] females with the frailties and contingencies of the mortal body” (Londa Schiebinger 2000, p. 1). Biological differences between males and females have been dwelt upon to signify their behavioral differences (see Schiebinger 2000, p. 25), and feminists have responded that such moves have been used to “justify gender inequality,” both culturally and legally (Dawn H. Currie & Valerie Raoul 1992, pp. 1–8; see also Elizabeth Grosz 1994, pp. 155–156). “[A]dult women” have thus been discursively situated as “more submissive, less independent . . . more easily influenced . . . [and] less objective” than their male counterparts (Jane M. Ussher 1989, p. 73), because they have been “conceptualized as being ruled by their . . . unstable and inherently weak” bodies (Ussher 1989, p. 1; see also Margrit Shildrick 2002, p. 36). The similarity between these misogynistic conceptions of the female body and the zombie’s unsteady corporeality—which is in a state of degeneration, which is exposed and vulnerable, which is treated as object (lacking in sentient salient consciousness)—are too politically pertinent to ignore.⁴

Patriarchal perspectives have associated femaleness with bodiliness in a manner that conceives the female body as fulfilling a function: being “for sex.” Deadgirl’s protagonists manifest that stance. Lead rapist, JT, views Deadgirl as a beast who “tried to bite like a wild fuckin’ dog” instead of screaming (that is, articulating emotion in a human manner). The female zombie’s monstrousness thereby

concretizes discourses that have been employed to suggest that women are “animalistic,” or lacking in rational control. This discourse is also bound into sex inasmuch as women are presumed to be unable to control their bodily urges. Deadgirl’s function, according to the male teen protagonists, is precisely defined in this way. Her biting indicates that “women’s sexuality is dangerous and threatening” (Ussher 1989, pp. 3 and 15), and needs taming. Deadgirl is positioned as subjugated sex-object in accordance with those values. As Mary Poovey has it, “as an incipiently sexual creature, woman is always [envisaged as] a sexual resource” by men: this is exactly how Deadgirl is represented. Moreover, Poovey’s assertion that “this move . . . entails separating female feeling from consciousness” (Mary Poovey 1990, p. 36) further evinces the connection between zombidom’s tropes and discourses of female subordination.

That female sexuality is conceived as at once passive/objectifiable and active/monstrous in this way augments the complications arising from treating the zombie as a necrophilic sex-object. The male teens initially characterize Deadgirl as an object, JT suggesting that they can “leave her . . . destroy her” or “keep her.” Wheeler and JT refer to Deadgirl numerous times as “it,” treating her as a possession. It is ambiguous whether this is the case because she is undead, because she is female, or simply because they have claimed (and thus “own”) her. Moreover, after she is damaged by Johnny’s beating, JT tapes a photograph of a model over her face (so he can “get it up”). The violence of that displacement is underlined when JT lodges a knife into Deadgirl’s head as he declares that he will replace her. As he tries to “fix her up” with lipstick to conceal the damage done to her face, she kills the wild dog that inhabits the sanatorium. Her mouth is resultantly smeared in blood. JT’s normalized mode of objectification (covering her face with make-up) thus cannot obscure—and is itself rendered invisible by—the violence ensuing from her imprisonment.

Objectification is thereby manifested as gendered, sexual violence. JT proscribes a function to Deadgirl’s infected bullet wounds that evidences his view that the

female body is literally constituted by a series of “fuck holes.” Following his complaint that her undead vagina is too dry (“gotta get some lube or something in there”), JT notes that Deadgirl’s puss-filled wounds are “warm and wet,” and thus are suitable orifices for violation. The physical damage done to her body is thus paralleled by symbolic—and equally gendered—forms of violence. Both of these forms are eroticized by the teens.

Deadgirl is both “a monster” (agent) and “hot pussy” (object) to JT. The female zombie qua zombie evokes the paradoxical roles women are required to fulfill by patriarchy. Simultaneously repellant and alluring to the men who define them, women are expected to be both “the pure, virginal, ‘good’ woman . . . unspoiled by sex or sin [and] . . . the whore, consumed by desires of the flesh” (Ussher 1989, p. 14). In *Deadgirl*, these states are manifested by the yin and yang of the film’s two central females, Deadgirl and Joann. Joann is presented as Rickie’s love interest (“pure”), mirrored by JT’s interactions with Deadgirl as sex-object (“monstrous”). However, the narrative portrays these as interchangeable states. In Rickie’s masturbatory fantasy, he finds Deadgirl’s monstrosity—signified by her growling and snapping—to be as fascinating as Joann’s virtuousness. While Deadgirl is depicted in darkness and is ferocious, Joann is envisaged in sunlight, being timid and sweet in Rickie’s dream. These are represented as the two roles women can occupy, both being defined by male desires. That paradox is echoed in the film’s ambivalent attitude towards Deadgirl herself. Phillip Blackford, Deadgirl’s post-production sound-designer, refers to the recurring piano motif as a “siren song, calling [Rickie] back down” to the Deadgirl (DVD commentary), marking Deadgirl as a sexual temptress, despite the facts of her imprisonment and voicelessness.

Even when desired and submissive then, the female body is presented as a site of horror for men (Simon Clark 2006, p. 203; Creed 1993, pp. 105–121; Elizabeth Grosz 1995, p. 293). This is evident in *Deadgirl*, but the film hypostatizes biases that have been prevalent for centuries. These discourses of disgust and desire

have been maintained by ideological institutions as well as cultural representations. The female body's "horrors" are imbued with political significance by that history. Scrutinizing the contradictions arising within those representations exposes the instability of discourses that naturalize socio-political bias. The gendered zombie urgently requires attention from feminist scholars since the trope draws on highly problematic connections between gender subordination's history and the zombie's mindless-monstrousness.

Monstrous-Masculine: Becoming a "Man" Through Sexual Violence

The discovery of Deadgirl in an abandoned asylum echoes a very real oppression of female freedom; "[a]s nineteenth-century women became increasingly vocal about their discontent their [male] doctors began to" apply diagnoses of "hysteria and neurasthenia . . . to every woman who spoke of women's rights or who attempted an independent act" (Ussher 1989, p. 138; see also Schiebinger 2000, p.26). This historical subjugation is paralleled by and reified in a contemporary setting via the female zombie—viewed as monster by the males that dominate the narrative—who is chained down, raped and beaten.

Yet the asylum also symbolizes social sickness, indicating that some behaviors, at certain junctures in history, are perceived as contravening normative standards. That oppression, in turn, reveals that our moral and behavioral practices are constructions. Oppression resounds with the presence of the zombie itself: "the Undead corpse is the nemesis, but also the product, of a repressive civilization" (Clark 2006, p. 199, emphasis mine). While the implications of this history are clear—that women have been, and are still oppressed by patriarchy—by foregrounding male interactions, the film also delineates the pressures that burden males. That is, the same order of patriarchy requires them to become (ideologically constructed) "men."

In that sense, masculinity's normative invisibility (Maccormack 2008, p. 130) is exposed for inspection, and equally requires attention. Deadgirl's exterior monstrosity misdirects. The narrative negotiates a switch whereby the apparently "natural" ideological connection constructed between the female body and horror is fractured. Deadgirl

reflects (in extremis) the discursive history of sexualization, passivity and monstrosity that has been used to subjugate women. The male teens represent the parallel strand of that history: men are portrayed as callous rapists, defined by the violence they do to women.

The masculine norms the teens embody—which are associated with patriarchal domination—are rendered abnormal by zombie-rape’s necrophilic overtones. The zombie’s status as passive sex-object combined with the inequality the gendered zombie symbolizes marks the teens’ version of maleness as normative, yet simultaneously repellent. While it is clear that the narrative’s attitude towards women is misogynistic, understanding precisely what *Deadgirl* symbolizes makes it difficult to identify with the teens’ eroticization of her body. We are left with the horror that *Deadgirl* is an erotic object only because she epitomizes powerlessness. The female zombie reifies oppressive gender discourses, creating a fissure in the relationship between representation and encoded meaning. Resolving the horror involves rejecting the sadistic, one-dimensional male viewpoints that the narrative foregrounds.

Viewed from this angle, it is clear that the male teens become increasingly abhorrent the more they revel in rape. Wheeler, for example, fondles Joann while she is still human/alive. He loses sight of the apparent difference between *Deadgirl* and living females, envisaging all women as his sex-captives. Presenting sex as monstrous then (even if only because it involves zombies) challenges assumptions regarding normative heterosexual male attitudes to sex, suggesting that given the chance and a lack of inhibitory factors, the average teenage male would commit rape. This representation manifests what Robert Jensen describes as “dominant masculinity,” which is primed to be mob-like, “ready to rape,” and is “numbed, disconnected, shut-down” (2007, pp. 1 and 185). The fact that all of the film’s central male teens engage in zombie-rape suggests that they are not a perverse minority, but the logical product of prevalent social pressures. In that sense, films such as *Deadgirl* implicate the viewer (male or female) as part of an ideological system producing such attitudes in young people: our unspoken complicity supports these social biases.⁵

This, rather than *Deadgirl*, is the narrative’s true site of horror. Although callous, psychotic and depraved, the teens are also represented as “everyday” boys. While this means “normative” sexual relationships and inequalities are placed under scrutiny, the very

acceptability of those behaviors in the diegetic context is disturbing. The narrative does not present the teens' actions as patently immoral, while the teens' normativity implicates male sexual fantasy generally as violent and founded on inequality. Because the teens' motives are uncannily in keeping with ideologies that seek to maintain masculine hegemony, it is that dominance that is ultimately critiqued as "abnormal." Rickie and Johnny's attempts to play-to-type—performing the role of "hero" to Joann's "damsel in distress"—are thus disturbed by Joann's responses to their attitudes. When Johnny beats Rickie, he proclaims to Joann that he has enacted violence in her name: "come on baby, I'm just defending your honor." Joann, disgusted by both parties' macho posturing retorts, "you're just being an asshole." Equally, when Rickie declares his love for Joann in her throes of death, she replies (quite reasonably, if a little bluntly), "fucking grow up." Since the narrative arc presents a journey into manhood, this is precisely what Rickie does.

Manhood is defined—both by Jensen (2007) and in *Deadgirl*—by the pressure to assert sexual dominance over women. Indeed, James W. Messerschmidt's (2000) study of adolescent male sexual violence perpetrators highlights that their criminal behaviors are motivated by social pressures associated with masculinization. Rickie's journey into manhood thus requires that he forsake his dream of being Joann's boyfriend, and instead seek to dominate her. This choice is literalized in the film's climax where JT asks Rickie to turn Joann into the next *Deadgirl*: "you don't have to be the nice guy down here . . . you want what should have been yours a long time ago." Rickie is given responsibility to choose, and the film's final shot of Joann, vacantly red-eyed and bound to the asylum bed, attests to Rickie's decision to "grow up," or "man-up" as JT puts it.

Underscoring the males' youth frames them as powerless. Sexual domination is the "solution" that allows them to attain illusory control. Far from being "men" however, the central teens' masculine posturing reveals only their immaturity. JT's childishness is signaled when he, after becoming a rapist and abductor, requests "just don't tell my grandma okay?" as he bleeds to death. Moreover, Rickie's obsession with Joann is characterized as infantile. He is said to have been obsessed with her since they shared a kiss in "fourth grade" (hence why she declares he should "grow up").

Rickie spends the narrative in flux between states of masculinity. He represents both the passivity associated with boyishness, and the ubiquitous notion that men are expected to

act like sexual brutes. This pressure is elucidated when an apprehensive Johnny is goaded into orally violating Deadgirl by JT and Rickie. When he agrees to rape, Johnny's masculinity is positively reinforced by Dwyer's repeated declaration "you're the man Johnny." The young males thus define each other via sex (whether they are "getting any"). Since their machismo has to be validated by others, and hinges on arbitrary actions rather than principles, the teens not only do not have a coherent notion of masculinity to aspire to, but also cannot autonomously define themselves. They are, in this latter respect, zombie-like.

Unlike Deadgirl however, the teens actively decide to become monsters, and thus bear the responsibility for that choice. Although the males are privileged with the power to choose, their immaturity means they fail to take responsibility for their actions, or envisage anything other than immediate consequences. Rickie's attitudes are indicative. He is interested in "some kind of reward" for finding Deadgirl, concentrating on his own immediate gain. He is concerned that JT shot Deadgirl "with [his] fuckin' gun," expressing his concern over being blamed for her murder. He also refuses to "touch her" because it is "asking for trouble," thus considering only the repercussions for himself, not her suffering. Men wield power here, yet the result is that women suffer, and neither party fully understands why this is the case.

Adolescence is not only a state of flux that brings out the worst in these individuals; it is also a point of vulnerability. As such it connotes the possibility of change. While they make ugly decisions, there is at least the prospect that the teens can make better choices. Indeed, since they seem to revert to stereotypical masculine behaviors (particularly aggression), if the discursive norms surrounding masculinity were amended, their behavior would also transform. The instance in which we witness JT's demeanor change from whispering "look at me" to Deadgirl, to rough thrusting and posturing as he hears Wheeler approach ("you fuckin' like that don't you . . . zombie cunt") is at once a manifestation of the unspoken pressure between males to behave "like a man," but is also a fracture in JT's overwrought performance. Masculinity is but a façade, better understood as mask-ularity. The solitary plant growing in the desolate asylum basement does not just symbolize the flicker of consciousness in the Deadgirl's apparently empty cadaver then: it also signals the possibility of starting anew.

Conclusion: Unresolved Horror as Political Challenge

Even if *Deadgirl* itself is unable to offer a solution to patriarchal dominance, its horror at least exposes gender relations as problematic. If it were not for the film's necrophilic overtones, *Deadgirl* might fall prey to Aviva Briefel's assumption that the "gendering of . . . pain felt by monsters [in horror film] and the sadistic acts they subsequently commit provides an unfortunately reassuring stability" (2005, p. 25). In *Deadgirl*, masculinity is problematic rather than enjoyable or stable. Masculinity is the film's primary site of horror. Since it is so explicitly biased towards subjugating its female zombie, *Deadgirl* demands that we pay attention to its negotiation of sexual inequality. The film is grueling to watch because it is founded on the terror of rape. Moreover, the narrative's ending refuses closure: while Jen Webb and Sam Byrnam contend that the zombie-narrative usually ceases when "something is reconciled; the horror is put back into the closet" (2008, p. 89), *Deadgirl* closes with Rickie replicating JT's violent obsession, and the original *Deadgirl* roaming free. The horror explodes outward and is actively propagated, not resolved.⁶ The film's disturbance thus serves as a call to action. It does not let the viewer rest easy knowing the terror is dissipated and under control.

While Rickie abducting Joann is a bleak conclusion, we should also note that JT's final words are "I can feel her inside me." Despite being the narrative's central advocate of rape, he becomes undead after *Deadgirl* bites him. In that sense, he learns what it is to be like her. She has incurred on him (is "inside" him) paralleling his violation of her body with her infection of his. The zombie-virus and rape make monsters of them both. This is the closest *Deadgirl* comes to gender equality, and even this is defined by carnage and sexual violation. The film may be repellent, but it at least serves to outrage and provoke the viewer. Its "perverse" actions challenge the passivity Ariel Levy refers to as having fostered a generation of post-feminist "Female Chauvinist Pigs" (2005). The acceptability and ubiquity of

sexualized, misogynistic representations of women in popular culture has arisen out of passivity in Levy's view. That silent crisis is symbolized via Deadgirl's inability to verbalize her suffering.

According to Creed, "the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender positions from those who do not" (Creed 1993, p. 11). While this confirms the pressures faced by the male teens in Deadgirl and explains their ghastly responses, gender normativity's stability is thrown into question by Deadgirl's presence. The gendered zombie is thus a powerful figure. As Shildrick observes, monsters do not just "threaten to overrun the boundaries of the proper . . . they promise to dissolve them" (Shildrick 2002, p. 11). Analyses of gender representations in horror would benefit from addressing other examples of sexualized zombies in this light.

The boundaries Shildrick refers to are founded on the apparent stability of binaries: in this case, of fantasy and reality, life and death, male and female. Those dichotomies are constructed illusions. Their stability is a façade sustained by reiteration. While our gender system might seem secure compared to the sexual atrocities presented in fictional horror narratives, it is the genre's willingness to test the boundaries of fantasy/reality, of female/male, of life/death, of ab/normal that exposes the volatility of those elements.

Horror itself bears comparison to necrophilia then, evoking the same kind of symbolic disruption Dudley (1999, p. 291) observes: "necrophilia is often destructive, misogynist, obsessive, totalitarian. It is also nostalgic," yet it is equally "the displaced, uncanny desire to dig up the past and make it live again—to recover a trace of the lost other in order to fill the cultural and institutional gaps created by new ideologies." Representations of sexual violence found in recent torture porn and neo-grindhouse horror films such as *Run Bitch Run* (2009) and *Gutterballs* (2008) may hark back to 1970s' exploitation cinema, but they are not simply nostalgic. These images signify according to the context in which they are

decoded. Examining contemporary images that portray misogyny is vital if we are to understand not only the challenges feminism faces, but also how far we have come thanks to feminist interventions that have occurred between the 1970s and the present, even if gender representations themselves are remarkably resistant to change.

Like a zombie, patriarchal dominance should be of the past: it lingers, and may not be cognizant of the horror it evokes, yet it persists as an unwelcome and troubling presence. Contrary to MacCormack's assertions that "zombie films frequently disregard gender for viscera;" and that "the focus on gore necessarily challenges reading gender through the flesh, because when the flesh is destroyed or reorganized these aspects become arbitrary" (Maccormack 2008, p. 104), in films such as *Deadgirl* the violence done to bodies is inextricable from social injustice and gendered flesh. *Deadgirl* certainly depicts violent heterosexual intercourse, and undoubtedly presents many more problems than it can possibly resolve. Such images may be easy to discount or disavow as misogynistic propaganda, but that perception only stresses how vital it is that we scrutinize and understand those representations.

Notes

1. The issue of gender and the use of feminist methodologies to interrogate the zombie have been concerned with the human characters present, ignoring the potential implications of zombie gender (see Barry Keith Grant 1996, pp. 200–212; Harvey Greenberg 1993, p. 86; Kim Paffenroth 2006, pp. 59–66; Natasha Patterson 2008, pp. 103–118; Tony Williams 1996, pp. 129–135). The lack of engagement with this issue in zombie studies is indicated by the absence of the terms "gender" and "feminism" in Glenn Kay's *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide* (2008).
2. Zombies are principally non-conscious animated entities. This has been the prevalent paradigm since *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). In the iconic series of sequels that

followed (*Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Survival of the Dead* (2009)), the zombie has evolved into consciousness. This trajectory has had a profound effect on the subgenre which has increasingly tended to lean towards sentient versions of the zombie since the mid-1980s. The issue of zombie-consciousness has also been raised in a branch of philosophy (epitomized by the work of Daniel C. Dennett (1998), John Heil (2003), Robert Kirk (2005) and Don Locke (1976)), which is concerned with what zombies reveal about human consciousness.

3. By way of a useful comparison, Rosi Braidotti (2004, pp. 92, 95–97 and 107–110) discusses the nature “technophilic anthropomorphism” and the automaton as erotic object.
4. Feminist interventions have “reinserted the body into history, bringing to light issues that had previously been considered too vulgar, trivial or risqué to merit serious scholarly attention” (Schiebinger 2000, p. 1; italics mine), including women’s “bodiliness,” and its associated inferiority to the rational concerns of “male” discourse. Indeed, the take-over is such that Horner and Keane suggest that “[i]n feminist literary and cultural criticism, ‘the body’ crops up with such regularity that the overprivileged ‘mind’ seems to have had its day” (2000, p. 1). The suggestion that “autonomy . . . synonymous in western culture with maturity, independence, and full subjecthood, but for males only” (Valerie Raoul 1992, p. 267) is the norm renders that segregation between mind and body a gendered division, placing it at the core of self-constitution. Many feminists have recognized this binary as evidence of patriarchal bias.
5. While Jensen is interested in masculinity and “what men can do” (2007, p. 181), Roy F. Baumeister and Jean M. Twenge (2002) contend that women too are frequently responsible for propagating female oppression.
6. The tendency to utilize bleak open-endings is typical of torture porn more generally.

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